

Emergency, by any other word

The Toronto Star

December 31, 2019 Tuesday

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Section: EDITORIAL; Pg. A10

Length: 621 words

Body

What's in a word? Often, quite a lot. And the choices that lexicographers make when they single out words to sum up the year just passed can tell us a lot about the times we live in.

So it is this year, with Oxford Dictionaries' selection of its word of the year for 2019. In fact, they found they needed not one, but two words, this time around. Their choice for the 12 months just passed: "climate emergency."

That's a bit of cheat, in our mind, but let it pass. Twenty-nineteen was certainly a year when everything to do with the changing climate jumped to the top of the public agenda.

It was a year that ended with Time magazine naming 16-year-old Greta Thunberg as its "person of the year" for her worldwide climate activism. The only question some people had is why she wasn't handed a Nobel Prize as well.

No surprise, then, that the folks at Collins Dictionary had a similar idea and chose "climate strike" as their word of the year for 2019.

Collins helpfully defined it as "a form of protest in which people absent themselves from education or work in order to join demonstrations demanding action to counter climate change." Or the "climate emergency," if you prefer.

Climate change, in fact, now seems too milquetoast to many for what the planet is facing. One factor that prompted Oxford Dictionaries to designate "climate emergency" as its word of the year was a decision by the Guardian newspaper to use that phrase in its environmental coverage.

As explained by Guardian editor-in-chief Katherine Viner, "the phrase 'climate change' sounds rather passive and gentle when what scientists are talking about is a catastrophe for humanity." Hence some of Oxford's runners-up for word of the year.

They include "eco-anxiety," defined as "extreme worry about current and future harm to the environment caused by human activity and climate change." Oxford noticed an extraordinary increase of 4,290 per cent in the use of that word in 2019 - a sign that fear about the planet burning up is already driving some people over the edge.

There's also "climate action" and "climate crisis," pretty much a synonym for "climate emergency." And finally "ecocide," or "destruction of the natural environment by deliberate or negligent human action." Definitely something to be anxious about.

All this is troubling in the extreme, and explains why Greta Thunberg's "Fridays for Future" school walkouts struck such a chord with young people all around the world in 2019 and turned her into a global celebrity.

It also helps to explain the choice made by Dictionary.com for its 2019 word of the year: "existential."

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No, it doesn't reflect any upsurge in fascination with long-dead philosophers of existentialism like Kierkegaard and Sartre, or the novels of Albert Camus. In its current iteration "existential" simply suggests a threat to one's very existence.

Interest in it shot up, says Dictionary.com, when Joe Biden called Donald Trump an "existential threat to America." A questionable philosophical statement, but we get his point.

And specifically, says Dictionary.com, "existential" now "captures a sense of grappling with the survival - literally and figuratively - of our planet, our loved ones, our ways of life." Thunberg herself used the word when she appeared before a U.S. Congressional committee and demanded that politicians treat climate change "like the existential crisis it is."

All this, of course, is "just words," by definition. But words can lead to action; indeed, there is no action that doesn't first start with words.

So it may in the long run be highly significant that 2019 witnessed the emergence of a public discourse dominated by the language of climate change - or climate emergency. In the end, words do matter.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: COLUMN

Publication-Type: NEWSPAPER

Subject: DICTIONARIES & THESAURI (92%); CLIMATE CHANGE (90%); CLIMATOLOGY (89%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (89%); REPORTS, REVIEWS & SECTIONS (79%); LINGUISTICS (78%); STRIKES (71%); POLLUTION & ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS (70%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (59%); AWARDS & PRIZES (53%); NOBEL PRIZES (53%)

Person: GRETA THUNBERG (90%)

Load-Date: December 31, 2019